

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

**WHAT ROLE DOES THE EXECUTIVE OFFICER PLAY IN
ENSURING SENIOR OFFICER SUCCESS?
BUILDING AN ORGANIZATION OF TRUST IS KEY**

BY

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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Robert F. King, United States Air Force, is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. He graduated from University of Arkansas with a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering and earned his commission through their ROTC program. In addition, he earned a Master of Business Administration from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and a Master of Arts in Organizational Management from The George Washington University. Lieutenant Colonel King has served in a variety of command and staff roles in aircraft maintenance, munitions operations, acquisitions, space operations, budget execution and programming. He also deployed to United States Central Command in support of OPERATIONS IRAQI and ENDURING FREEDOM and served as the Space Capabilities officer on the Director of Space Forces staff. Pertinent to this research, he has served as executive officer to both the Space and Missile Systems Center Vice Commander at Los Angeles Air Force Base, California and the Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Plans and Programs at the Pentagon.

Abstract

In this Post-Cold War era of reduced personnel and budgets, the Air Force cannot afford units fraught with mistrust. As Stephen M. R. Covey convincingly argues, trust is required for organizations to be highly efficient with high morale. It is incumbent upon the senior leader to envision and take steps toward a leadership environment of trust, but because the executive officer sits at the nexus of crucial trust relationships and is often the “face” of the organization, he or she must exude trust as daily tasks are executed.

Execs must begin by first understanding and then working to prove and improve their personal credibility. This is done by knowing and practicing Covey’s Four Cores of Credibility. Those cores are integrity, intent, capabilities, and results. Establishing credibility with the senior leader is the exec’s first required trust relationship. With that trust established, it will still take work and conscientious attention to propagate that trust outward from the front office by use of Covey’s 13 behaviors of straight talk, demonstrate respect, create transparency, right wrongs, show loyalty, deliver results, get better, confront reality, clarify expectations, practice accountability, listen first, keep commitments, and extend trust. The exec must not only practice the 13 behaviors, but also create opportunities for the senior leader to practice them as well. It is only with dedicated attention and work towards creating an organization of trust that it will actually be achieved.

Introduction

The scope of responsibility for today's Air Force senior leaders is quite overwhelming. In this age of technology, the volume of information available has skyrocketed, and the ease of accessing it has greatly increased the speed with which Air Force leaders are expected to respond. Also, the larger the stage one is trying to understand and therefore direct, the greater the assumptions and farther from reality decisions are made and actions are taken.¹ The military's best solution to handle the volume and complexities of command is the staff system. Zabecki argued that this system has been the distinguishing feature of the modern military.² Senior leaders must rely on their front-office staff for mission success because of the volume and complexities of command. Success, therefore, is directly tied to the effectiveness of the executive officer who directs the activities of the front-office staff. The "exec" advises the commander, anticipates his or her needs, controls access to him or her, drafts his or her correspondence, and often times acts the conduit of communication between the senior leader and those in the unit as well as in other units. All these actions require profound trust between the senior leader and the exec. While it is completely the senior leader's responsibility to create a command environment of trust throughout the organization, the competence of the front office staff also plays a critical role in producing organizational trust. Because the executive officer leads the front office staff and works at the nexus of crucial trust relationships within the unit, he or she plays a major role in building organizational trust, and therefore must exude credibility with integrity, intent, competence, and results. The exec is also key in creating opportunities for the senior leader to exhibit behaviors that promote organizational trust. There are volumes of resources on how to be a good leader available to Air Force officers, but, surprisingly, very little on how to be a good executive officer, which is a unique role best described as a leader-follower.

Leadership Infused Air Force Culture

Leadership is an integral part of Air Force culture. From the very first day of their commissioning training, Air Force officer candidates are not only taught about leadership but encouraged and even cajoled to become lifelong students of leadership. The goal of almost every officer should be to be an outstanding leader through years of study and practice in preparation for command at the squadron level and above or equivalent leadership roles. There are volumes of academic materials, books, and training courses throughout Air Force commissioning sources and Professional Military Education (PME) on crucial leadership. All this effort towards growing leaders is a fundamental and worthy aspect of being in the Air Force. Officers are expected to read, think, and even write about leadership. It is quite a paradox then, despite the universally known fact that even the best leaders cannot be successful without excellent support from their executive officer, that very little thought has been paid to what is required to be successful in this unique leadership-followership role. This shows in the lack of literature and training available to new executive officers.

This paper will attempt to fill in one of the gaps in Air Force literature on this topic by describing the importance of the executive officer and providing what traits and behaviors are required for success, especially in his or her role of propagating a climate of trust. Stephen Covey's books, *The Speed of Trust* and *Smart Trust*, are used as the primary sources for these trust concepts because they are consistent with the Air Force core values. Covey's theses about trust will be used as the primary lens in which Air Force organizations will be examined to answer the following questions: 1) What traits must the executive officer possess in order to be trusted by all who interact with him or her? And, 2) What are the critical behaviors the executive officer should encourage and help the senior leader perform in order to create an organization

that enables trust relationships up and down the chain of command and across the larger organization to adjacent units?

The Air Force Executive Officer

To begin, it is important to understand the role of the executive officer in the Air Force and how they are chosen. The only official Air Force document that describes the role of the executive officer is the Air Force Officer Classification Directory (AFOCD). It describes the role of the exec as

Officer oversees information management activities for the commander and deputy commander; handles protocol duties as required; implements, directs, and coordinates executive functions, services, and activities; represents the commander in interaction with other agencies of all levels; and is responsible for unit programs and special projects as directed by the commander.³

While, to some, this description may sound like a glorified office management job, it is much more complex than these words convey. This is because senior leaders are extremely busy; therefore, they typically do not always have enough time to think strategically. The exec must help the senior leader in this regard by thinking strategically when deciding if, when, and how to provide information to the senior. When speaking for the senior leader, the exec must ensure commander's intent is conveyed clearly and accurately. It is for this reason that execs should be chosen carefully and trained appropriately. Because there are few regulations, policies, information, or training available, selection and training of execs is informal and based on tradition or preferences.

The exec must conform to the senior leader's style in order to form a "super hero/side kick" relationship.⁴ As it is a unique and special relationship, senior leaders often pick officers with great career potential and personalities that click with their own to serve as their exec. The selection process first narrows the pool of candidates using performance records and

recommendations. Then, the senior leader conducts interviews and selects the exec from this narrowed pool. This process is used to ensure officers are selected who have good records and personalities that mesh with the senior leader. An executive officer sees and is involved in almost every issue a senior leader deals with, observes and learns from his or her leadership, and interacts constantly with other senior leaders.

There is very little guidance available to newly chosen execs to draw from in order to prepare for the job. Often times execs are chosen from within the unit, so they, at least, understand the mission and have already established relationships with many unit personnel. But surprisingly, there is no training, no written guidance, and no overt way to learn how to be a good executive officer other than relying on the previous exec for advice. The senior leader is most often too busy to adequately pass on expectations or provide guidance or preferences, so newly minted execs must use their best judgment and common sense to ensure they are successful. Executive officer jobs, while extremely difficult and vitally important, are surprisingly sink or swim. The poem by Edgar Albert Guest sums up the situation quite well.

Figure it out for yourself, my lad,
You've all that the greatest of men have had,
Two arms, two hands, two legs, two eyes,
And a brain to use if you would be wise,
With this equipment they all began,
So start for the top and say "I can."⁵

Fortunately, only proven officers who have high ability and are fast learners are typically chosen, but even so, being an exec is unlike any other role officers have previously undertaken because of its unique leader-follower aspects. Therefore, newly chosen execs must learn quickly, adapt to their new role, and tap the knowledge of the front office staff they must lead.

The typical Air Force unit at the Wing-level or above has a support staff appropriate to its size and mission. The commander's executive officer leads the support staff, usually consisting of administrative assistant(s), the aide-de-camp, executive officers from subordinate units, and any other staff handling things such as tasking systems, personnel paperwork, and speech writing. This team must work together in a fast-paced environment to ensure the senior leader has everything needed to succeed and all assigned tasks are completed on time. Executing effective meetings is much more than just arranging times, places and people. The senior leader must be prepared for the meeting in advance with prior access to information and possibly a pre-brief by a subject matter expert. Tasks requiring the senior leader's signature or approval must be thoroughly reviewed and answers prepared prior to the senior leader ever seeing it, and in sufficient time for his or her review prior to the due date. Speeches must be written, trips must be planned, briefings prepared, phone calls returned, emails drafted, promotion paperwork completed, etc. The only constant is change itself. All this work requires general knowledge of how the senior leader would and should respond. The central figure who must represent the senior leader's perspective in all these actions is the executive officer. However, an exec can only be successful in completing these tasks rapidly enough if trust is also established up and down the chain of command and laterally across the organization to sister organizations and mission partners.

Importance of Trust

Covey effectively argues that if trust is high, then things get done faster and cheaper.⁶ He also makes the point that energy, joy, and innovation are higher in high-trust organizations.⁷ If Covey is right, then Air Force organizations must have high trust to be most effective. This leadership environment of trust must begin with the vision and focus of the senior leader in order

to work, but, is in large part up to the executive officer to execute. The exec, as described thus far, is the cog in the unit that brings everything and everyone together, and therefore must himself/herself exude trust through by demonstrating character and competence while implementing the senior leader's vision and focus in order to create trust relationships throughout the organization and with adjacent organizations. The core element for these relationships start with trust between the senior leader and the exec and radiates outward from there. It extends to the front office staff first, then to the leadership and front office staffs of the subordinate units, then down to all the personnel in the unit. Once the senior leader and exec have established trust within their organization, trust can then be established outside the organization to higher headquarters and to leadership and front office staff of sister units. But, before this trust propagation can begin, the exec must first establish credibility, which leads to trust.

Covey argues that one must master the four cores of credibility in order to earn people's trust. The four cores of credibility are integrity, intent, capabilities, and results.⁸ These traits align perfectly with the Air Force Core Values of Integrity First, Excellence in all We Do, and Service before Self.⁹ Lieutenant General Darryl Roberson, Commander of Air Education and Training Command, views trust in much the same way. He believes trust is built with a combination of competence, care, and character.¹⁰ To be successful and do their part to create an organization of trust, an executive officer must exude credibility and help the senior leader and the rest of the organization exude and maintain credibility as well. While creating trust may sound as if it can be achieved simply by someone who is honest, that is really just the first step. Credibility can only be achieved, and therefore trust established, by possessing all four traits.¹¹

Integrity is the first trait that people think about when considering trust. Integrity is more than mere honesty; it is also acting with courage in accordance with one's own values and the values of the organization.¹² Execs see almost everything that a senior leader does and says privately, often peering into the commander's personal lives as well. It is of utmost importance, therefore, that the senior leader knows that the exec will not reveal private information about his or her life. Health data, fitness test results, personal struggles, and family issues all may be known by the exec and must be kept private. Also, behind-closed-door conversations, casual comments about other people both within and outside the organization, Uniform Code of Military Justice actions, personnel records, and promotion recommendations must be held in confidence as well. In short, the senior leader must know that the exec will be trustworthy with all this information and not share it. Taking it even further, it is the exec's responsibility to fiercely protect the senior leader's leadership image and credibility. Because integrity is also about acting with courage in accordance with one's values, another role an exec should play is as "reprover" to the senior leader; that is to quietly and respectfully tell the senior leader when they are out of line or out of touch with the organization.¹³

In much the same way the senior leader must trust the exec with private information, so must the front office staff trust each other. As a result of closely working long hours together, the front office staff knows most of the private information described above about one other. In order to maintain team cohesion and good relationships, every team member must know their private information will be protected by the rest of the team. The exec must set the tone and expectation of integrity in the front office and fiercely enforce it by correcting inconsistent behavior immediately. Unit personnel must also know that their personal information is safe

with the exec and front office staff. While integrity is an important first step to building credibility, it is only the first step.

Intent is the second core of credibility. Intent is related to integrity, and the two taken together create character. Intent is linked to our motives and agendas and the resulting behavior that links back to them.¹⁴ Because intent is internal and sometimes hard to read, people in organizations watch their leadership very closely and try to determine their true intent and motives based on their behavior. It is imperative that both the senior leader and the exec examine their motives and ensure they are rooted in genuine concern for the people and the mission, and then declare his or her intent overtly at every opportunity. If intent is self-serving, people will know it by witnessing inconsistent behavior. Bottom line, though, is that it is important the senior leader and exec have pure motives, declare them openly at every opportunity, and realize that actions speak louder than words. More about behaviors will be examined later in the paper, but before behaviors comes the two cores of credibility that determine one's competence.

Capability is the third core of credibility and gets to knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as personal style.¹⁵ While there are exceptions, in general, both senior leaders and execs are highly capable because of the thorough screening process and career tracks required to reach those positions. As stated previously, however, with little to no training, execs may struggle with a steep learning curve in the beginning to become highly capable in this role. What is important here, however, is that these high abilities are focused on the right objectives—the people and the mission. If the people are well taken care of, the mission will be accomplished. Personnel actions are the venue that unit personnel will look to most often to decide if they are, in fact, being taken care of properly. Key personnel actions are the evaluation system, the

promotion system, and the PME selection system. The exec is heavily involved in ensuring performance reports, promotion recommendations, and PME recommendations are done on time and done well. Because the exec sees all the personnel paperwork in the unit, he or she is in the best position to advise the senior leader about the quality of the paperwork coming up from subordinate units. This way, action can be taken to improve paperwork flowing out of the organization to higher headquarters. This adherence to excellence creates a culture of excellence within the organization and a reputation within the larger Air Force structure. An organizational reputation for taking care of your Airmen and producing results leads to the best people striving to be a part of the organization. Getting the best people in the organization drives up accomplishment. But even so, capabilities alone do not determine one's competence, and high talent is useless without getting results.

Results are the fourth and final core of credibility, and speaks to our ability to see the right things through to completion. Capabilities and results taken together make up one's competence.¹⁶ Nearly everyone has worked for someone who focused solely on results at the expense of everything else. They ruthlessly focus on the ends no matter the means, and this ruthlessness does get results, but it kills morale and motivation. Getting results must be the focus of all endeavors, but how we achieve those results matters just as much as the results themselves for long-term success and the development of trust. So results must come as the "result" of the first three cores, not at their expense.

Also, it is common practice for Air Force personnel to look at promotion and PME selection results to judge the competence of a senior leader and his or her staff. While those results are not completely within the control of the senior leader and the staff, it is vitally important that every effort possible is done to create opportunities for their personnel to succeed.

This effort, in turn, can make a difference in promotion percentages and be a huge boost to unit trust and morale. An exec who ensures the unit gets results with integrity and proper intent is invaluable to any Air Force organization.

An exec who successfully uses the four cores of credibility will form a bond of trust with the senior leader that then expands to the front office staff. When the leadership and front office have both character and competence, subordinate units should recognize this and begin to trust the leadership, and thus increase productivity and unit morale. But even if the senior leader and the exec are actually credible, therefore trustworthy, that does not automatically mean everyone in the unit and beyond will start to trust them. As stated, actions speak louder than words, therefore both the senior leader and the exec must put their credibility into action in order to propagate trust throughout the organization most effectively.

Stephen Covey's father is known to have said, "We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their actions."¹⁷ If the exec and senior leader are successful in focusing their intentions on the good of the people and the mission, and even practice all four cores of credibility, it is a great start but still will not be enough to fully establish an organization of trust. Establishing an organization of trust requires overt action and specific behaviors, and Covey describes 13 behaviors that will make it happen. Executive officers must understand these behaviors and create opportunities for the senior leader to exhibit them and also exhibit them themselves.

The first behavior is talk straight. Talking straight means telling the truth and leaving the right impression. People seldom flat out lie, but actions such as beating around the bush, withholding information, flattery, posturing, and spinning are not completely truthful and lower

trust.¹⁸ To achieve an organization of trust, senior leaders and execs must always talk straight and be up front.

The second behavior is to demonstrate respect. This behavior gets to the core of showing people that you care by treating them well.¹⁹ It is extremely important for trust to grow that the senior leader and exec are seen as respecting unit personnel. This is best done by respectfully listening to unit personnel and doing little things like having the senior leader walk to their office to talk to them rather than always summoning them to the front office. The exec can easily facilitate this very simple behavior of building trust.

The third behavior is to create transparency. It is about being real and genuine and telling the truth in a way that people can verify.²⁰ General Rand, Commander of the Air Force Global Strike Command, said “everyone wants leaders who are both courageous and transparent.”²¹ There are many opportunities when information can and should be shared with the unit, but the exec should encourage the senior leader to at least acknowledge undisclosed information and state the reasons it can not be shared. People genuinely want this kind of transparency, and it is required before there can be trust.

The fourth behavior is to right wrongs. This behavior is about not just apologizing about mistakes, but working hard to correct them.²² Senior leaders and execs are going to make mistakes. It is how they respond to these mistakes that either builds trust or diminishes it. Trying to hide the mistake and playing it down decreases trust. Whereas, owning up to the mistake and working to correct it builds trust.

The fifth behavior is to show loyalty. Covey defines showing loyalty as giving credit to others and speaking about people as though they were present.²³ The exec must inform the senior

leader on unit personnel accomplishments and encourage him or her to publicly praise them. On the flip side, if the senior leader criticizes unit personnel in a meeting, the exec must exercise the Nathan principle discussed previously and quietly and respectfully call his or her attention to the affects of those types of statements on organizational trust because criticism should be delivered in private unless the senior leader intends to produce a certain effect.

The sixth behavior is to deliver results. This behavior goes beyond delivering those results, but also setting expectations in advance.²⁴ Internal to the unit, as discussed previously, the best results to increase trust and unit morale are high promotion rates and PME selection. External to the unit, especially up the chain of command, mission accomplishment results are what counts. If the senior leader and exec have done their part in setting expectations and establishing a unit of trust, then results will follow. If they fail at this, the environment of a low trust organization will diminish results.

The seventh behavior is to get better. It is based on the principles of continuous improvement, learning, and change, and is how we maintain our competence in an ever changing world.²⁵ The senior leader and exec must strive to improve both their own performance and the unit through feedback from unit personnel. This requires the senior leader and to exec create an environment of openness for unit personnel to be confident enough to point out problems without fear of reprisal.

The eighth behavior is to confront reality. This behavior is about taking on tough issues overtly and being willing to discuss them. It includes “undiscussables” and the “elephant in the room” type issues. This produces an effect of genuineness that people really appreciate.²⁶ Execs should help the senior leader to see those tough issues clearly and encourage them to discuss

them openly with unit personnel. Also, execs should look at their own responsibilities and be willing to discuss problems in the front office openly. By doing this, the creativity of the unit and front office staffs can engage in order to solve the problem.

The ninth behavior is to clarify expectations. It is to create a shared vision and agreement about what needs to be done upfront.²⁷ Most everyone has had a supervisor that didn't know what they wanted until they saw it. This phenomenon is very frustrating and erodes trust and morale very quickly because unit personnel simply do not understand what the senior leader wants. The exec plays a critical role in helping the senior leader establish expectations and convey them to unit personnel. The exec has more access to the senior leader and can therefore ask questions to clarify points and then pass that information on to appropriate staff officers and unit personnel for action. Because the greatest challenge to a senior leader is time, the exec can also pull together his or her own estimation of what the guidance should be, confirm it with the boss, and then pass it on to the unit.

The tenth behavior is to practice accountability. This behavior has two areas. The first is practicing accountability with oneself first and the other is holding others accountable. Arnold Glasnow said, "A good leader takes more than their fair share of the blame and gives more than their share of the credit."²⁸ Senior leaders and execs must hold themselves accountable first, before they can credibly hold others accountable. They also must set expectations first, as mentioned previously, before they can hold others accountable. When people feel that everyone is held to the same standard, and they know clearly what is expected, profound trust is established.²⁹ The exec helps the senior leader hold themselves accountable by ensuring all Air Force standards are met despite their busy schedule. Required medical and dental readiness appointments, fitness tests, and online annual training should be completed on time. Also, execs

should inform the senior leader when certain standards have been violated within the unit so corrective action can be taken.

The eleventh behavior is to listen first. Listening first entails genuinely seeking to understand another person's thoughts, feelings, experience, and point of view before you try to diagnose, influence, or prescribe.³⁰ Unit personnel must feel like their thoughts and ideas are heard before decisions are made. Doing so creates buy-in from the organization. Both the senior leader and the exec are extremely busy, so it requires discipline and tremendous patience to listen intently. If a senior leader is not listening well, it is incumbent on the exec once again to enact the Nathan principle.

The twelfth behavior is to keep commitments. Keeping commitments is the quickest way to build trust in any relationship, and not keeping commitments is the quickest way to destroy trust.³¹ To build trust, execs must keep their commitments to the multitudes of people that he or she interacts with on a daily basis. Whether it is getting a document or question to the boss, scheduling a meeting when promised, or providing feedback on a particular subject, the exec must follow through. And this includes confirmation the task is done to the party one commits to for closure. In a similar fashion, the exec must track the commitments the senior leader makes, and ensure they are completed.

The thirteenth behavior is to extend trust. Extending trust is about choosing to believe that people are capable of being trusted, want to be trusted, and will run with trust when it is given to them.³² Once expectations are set and tasks assigned, the senior leader and exec must trust unit personnel to perform and deliver. When they don't, the behavior must be corrected. When they do, the behavior must be rewarded.

Recommendations

Current Air Force practice already does an excellent job teaching officers about top-down leadership and the kinds of relationship-building behaviors required for that typical style of leadership. But because the executive officer position is so crucial to the success of Air Force units, and it is a unique leader-follower position, the Air Force should put more thought into preparing officers for this challenging role.

Integrity is currently taught in almost all Air Force PME and leadership courses. These courses should be updated to ensure Air Force officers understand that trust requires much more than just integrity, but also intent, capability, and results. Officers should also be taught the basic tenets of building an organization of trust and that it requires both internal reflection and overt action. Because it requires careful thought and focus by the senior leader and exec to create an organization of trust, the Air Force should emphasize it and build upon it throughout all levels of PME so that it is ingrained in Air Force culture, starting with basic concepts in officer training and culminating with Air War College.

Senior leaders should recognize the vital role that execs play in unit success and only hire execs who already possess all four cores of credibility, and not hire those who only focus on results. Once hired, execs should continue to improve their credibility traits through self reflection and requesting feedback from the senior leader, the front office staff, and other execs from within and outside the organization. Also, execs should ensure they understand the 13 behaviors required to establish and maintain an organization of trust and not only practice them, but also create opportunities for the senior leader to demonstrate them often.

Establishing an online training course with basic expectations of how to be a successful exec would also be helpful in this endeavor. This course should include a module on how to establish personal credibility and how to help the senior leader create an organization of trust. The course should be mandatory for execs at the Group level and above.

Conclusion

The Air Force cannot afford units fraught with mistrust because mistrust breeds inefficiency, yet budgets and personnel have been severely reduced in this Post-Cold War era. As Covey convincingly argues, trust is required for organizations to be highly efficient and exhibit high morale. It is incumbent upon the senior leader to envision and take steps toward a leadership environment of trust, but because the executive officer sits at the nexus of crucial trust relationships and is often the “face” of the organization, he or she must exude trust as daily tasks are executed.

Execs must begin by first understanding and then working to prove and improve their personal credibility. This will build the first trust relationship required with the senior leader. With that trust established, it will still take work and conscientious attention to propagate that trust outward from the front office by use of Covey’s 13 behaviors. The exec must not only practice the 13 behaviors, but also create opportunities for the senior leader to practice them as well. It is only with dedicated attention and work towards creating an organization of trust that it will actually be achieved.

Notes

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